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Is a woman more likely to experience violence, if she earns more than her partner?

John Simister

Abstract

This paper is a replication of Simister (2013): which claims that if a woman earns more than her husband, she is more at risk of experiencing Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This paper uses a much larger set of household surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS); the new evidence supports the claims of the 2013 paper, and offers new perspectives. Female deference may be a way for a woman to protect herself from male violence.

The author is grateful that DHS survey data is made available to researchers. Any mistakes in this paper are the author's responsibility.

Introduction

Space does not permit a literature review; readers are referred to Simister (2013), which discusses various approaches – most of which are sociological. Other approaches include Grossbard (2015), who analyses views of some economists: her own approach is impressive, but complicated.

Many sociologists are ambivalent about women's earnings: they might allow a woman to walk away from a violent partner, but (if she stays with him) he may be unable to cope with his feelings of failure, if he cannot financially support his family. Rajkumari et al. (2016) wrote "The most common cause of violence (41.4%) as reported was 'Arguments due to financial problem'. Financial dependency as well as less education may act as a precipitating factor for violence".

Data and methods

This paper uses data from all relevant DHS surveys available in 2019, limited to female respondents (data on male respondents is not analysed here). In most DHS surveys, women are between 15 and 49 years old (IIPS & ICF, 2017a). This sample is restricted to women who are married/cohabiting in heterosexual relationships; the appendix shows effective sample-sizes for Figure 2 (Figures 1 and 3 have similar sample-sizes).

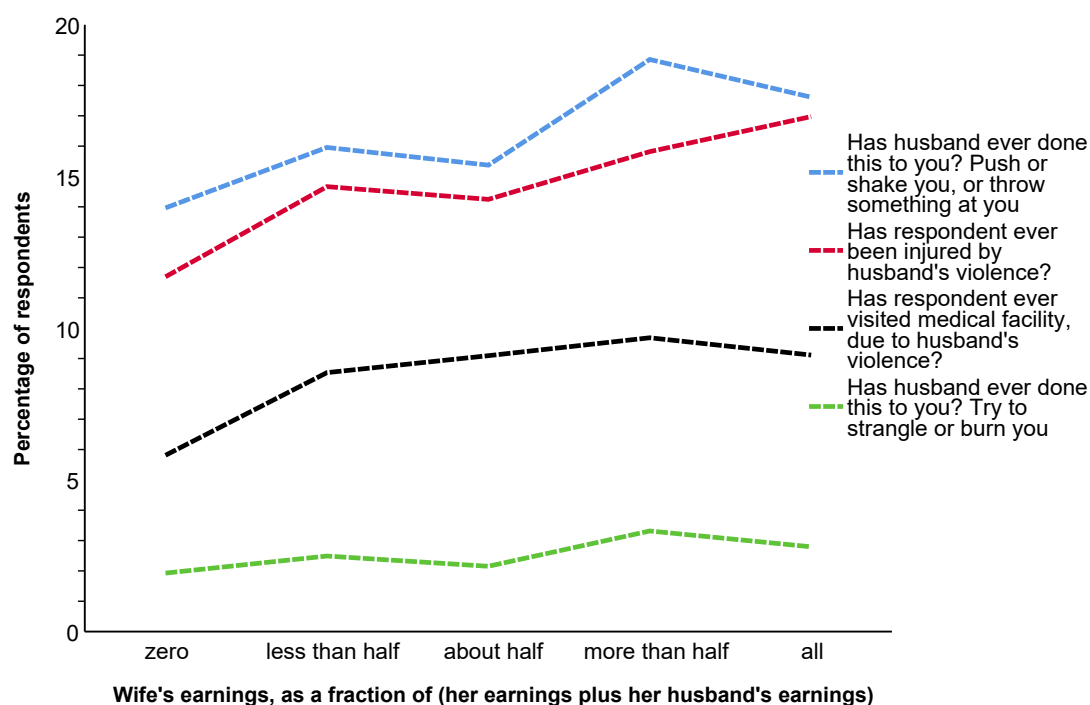
The horizontal axis of Charts in this paper use variable v746: *"Would you say that the money that you earn is more than what your husband earns, less than what he earns, or about the same? MORE THAN HUSBAND/LESS THAN HUSBAND/ABOUT THE SAME/HUSBAND HAS NO EARNINGS"* (IIPS & ICF, 2017b: 74), combined with data-processing by the author to identify women with no earnings. Other questions investigated here include (for the vertical axis of Figure 3): *"In your opinion, is a husband justified in hitting or beating his wife in the following situations: If she goes out without telling him?" (yes or no)* (IIPS & ICF, 2017b: 76).

Findings

Figure 1 aims to assess if claims by Simister (2013) are supported in DHS data. Each line is approximately horizontal, without the large spikes where the wife is the main earner; so the four lines in Figure 1 are less persuasive than Charts in Simister (2013). Nevertheless, the key finding is confirmed: comparing left and right sides of Figure 1, there is more violence against a woman if she earns 'more than half' or 'all' of the household income (as opposed to 'zero',

‘less than half’ and ‘about half’). Note that a household can have more than two employed people, as well as non-earned income such as interest on savings; such complications are beyond the scope of this paper.

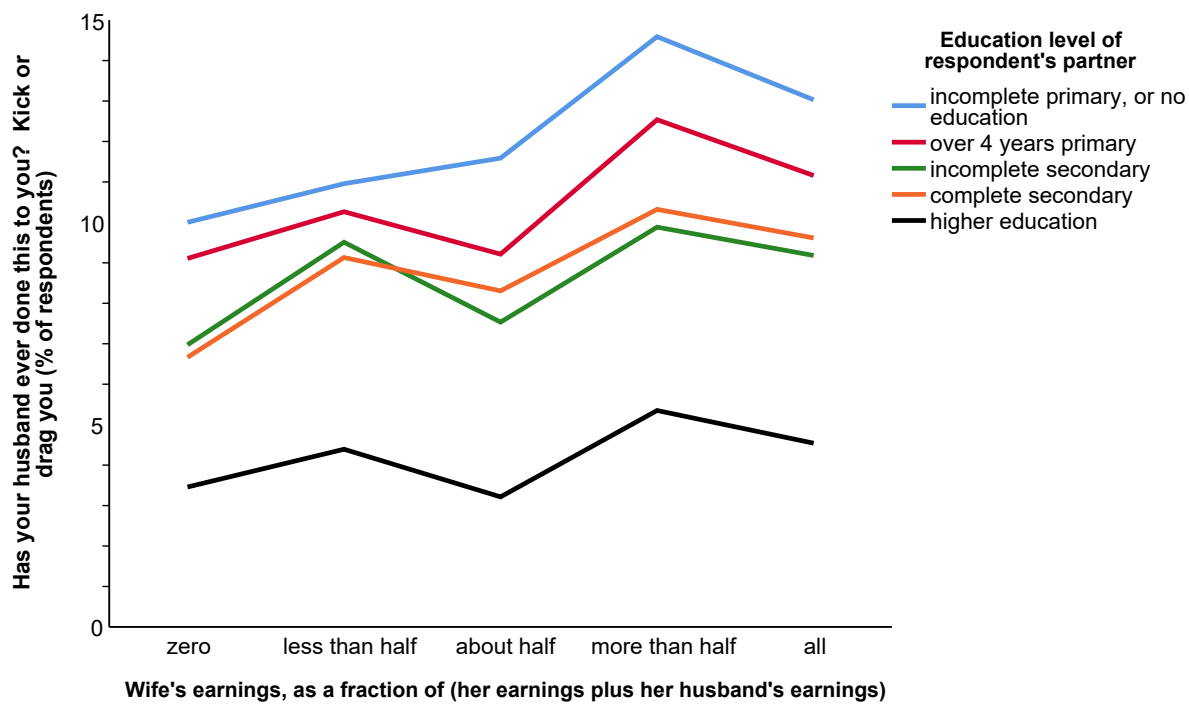
Figure 1: respondent experienced types of violence, by her earnings



Effective sample sizes: 550,551; 550,496; 131,645; and 55,257 cases respectively.

Madhivanan et al. (2014) state “women who contributed some household income were at significantly higher odds of being the victim of violence [...] female employment typically functions as a protective factor only when a partner is also employed; if an employed woman is partnered with an unemployed or underemployed spouse, her risk of violence increases”. This view is consistent with Figure 1.

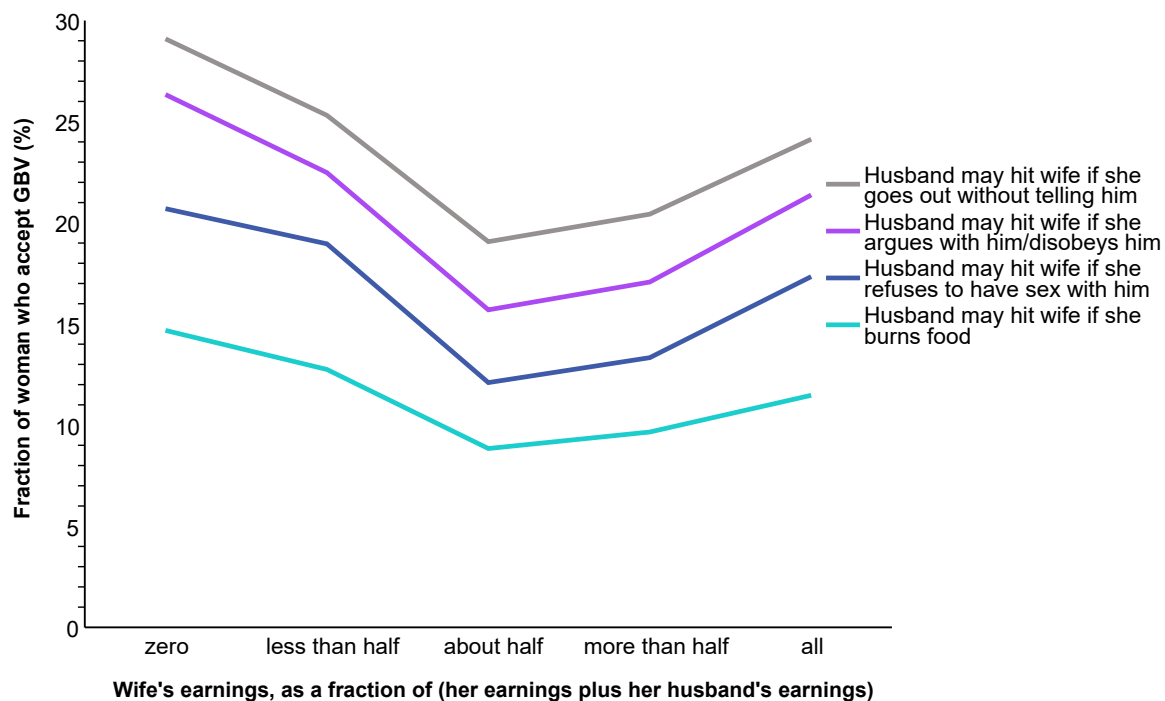
Figure 2: respondent experienced violence, by her earnings & partner's education



Effective sample-size: 524,015 cases.

Figure 2 confirms Simister (2013), in that there is a higher prevalence of violence on the right of Figure 2 (where the wife earned a large fraction of her & her partner's combined income), than on the left (where women earned less). It seems puzzling that the level of violence is higher if the wife earns 'less than half' or 'more than half' of the couple's income; this brief does not attempt to answer such questions.

Figure 3: women's attitudes to GBV, by female earnings



Effective sample-size: 24,663; 24,574; 23,254; 23,811 cases respectively.

Figure 3 analyses how women with different (relative) earnings feel, regarding domestic violence. Among women with no earnings, about 30% say it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife – if she goes outside the home without his permission. But moving from left to right, we see decreasing acceptance of this idea: among women who earn about as much as their husband ('about half', on the horizontal axis), this falls from 30% to about 20%. Other attitude questions in Figure 3 show similar results. We might interpret Figure 3 as evidence that as women earn more, they support equal rights more; but this trend reverses on the right, as women become the main earners. There are several ways we could explain this: for example, many women who earn more than their husband have experienced violence themselves (Figure 1), which may affect their acceptance of GBV (regrettably for academics, many women may come to see GBV as 'normal').

We could consider a 'symbolic interactionist' view. A relatively well-paid woman realises that if a woman is the main earner in her family, her husband will find this humiliating; it is in her interests to placate him – for example, by being deferential, and doing more unpaid housework. Academics in a developed country may find such thinking unacceptable – a woman should never be a second-class citizen; but we cannot protect every woman in the world from violence, so supporting vulnerable women (who find their own solutions) may be appropriate. Gwagwa (1998) discusses such issues, as well as others relevant to household members' behaviour – such as alcohol consumption.

Discussion

Who understands how a household works? We might imagine that a woman will feel empowered if she is earning: she is less dependent on her partner – if he misbehaves, she can take her children and leave him. But this paper confirms evidence in Simister (2013): male violence against women tends to increase (not reduce), if she earns more than he does. More research is needed.

Simister (2013) analysed surveys reporting husband & wife earnings, allowing the author to divide each sample into seven categories (rather than five, in this paper). Of the seven categories, the highest risk of GBV (by far) was in households where the wife earned between 83% & 99% of the couple's joint income. DHS data are less precise: few DHS surveys report wife's earnings, and no female respondents report their partner's earnings. In other respects, DHS surveys are much better: they are nationally representative (sampling urban & rural households, and in many locations); whereas most surveys used by Simister (2013) only interview respondents in a few cities. Among surveys studied in Simister (2013), BHPS is the most impressive; but DHS surveys cover many countries (see Appendix).

Conclusion

Evidence in this paper support the claim by Simister (2013) and others, that women tend to be more at risk if they earn more than their partner. Referring to India, Bhattacharya (2000: 22) wrote "Socialization ensures that women accept their subservient roles in the household and perpetuate the discrimination against their female offspring [...] ideology stresses male superiority within the household and places the women under the control of men throughout her life". Madhivanan et al. (2014) found interventions aimed at increasing women's job skills protect women (to some extent) against GBV; but "On the other hand, there is a risk that focusing primarily on providing opportunities for women to contribute some income to the household may actually put some at increased risk for physical violence. We suspect that partial contributions may upset the power dynamic in marital relationships without providing sufficient leverage to negotiate physical safety within the home [...] increasing a wife's household contribution may exacerbate the risk of violence".

There is general agreement among academics that more education for girls/women is appropriate. Figure 3 suggests male education is also important. If a man was socialised (as a boy) to believe he must be the family breadwinner and decision-maker, education could help him to reinvent himself as a 'modern man' if he finds himself unemployed.

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Appendix: effective sample-sizes for Figure 2.

Country	year	sample
Afghanistan	2015	20159
Armenia	2016	2824
Angola	2015	5465
Azerbaijan	2006	3619
Burkina Faso	2010	8817
Burundi	2016	5368
Benin	2018	3754
Bolivia	2008	9894
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2013	4638
Cote D'Ivoire	2012	4029
Cameroon	2011	3233
Colombia	2010	26582
Dominican Republic	2007	6231
	2013	4128
Egypt	2014	6129
Ethiopia	2016	3710
Gabon	2012	3136
Ghana	2008	1420
Gambia	2013	2997
Guatemala	2015	5682
Honduras	2012	10331
Haiti	2006	2217
	2012	5623
	2017	3729
India	2006	62293
	2015	60064
Jordan	2007	2818
	2012	5812
	2017	5153
Kenya	2009	4051
	2014	3624
Kyrgyzstan	2012	4301
Kampuchea	2005	1578
	2014	3125
Comoros	2012	1893
Liberia	2007	3208
Mali	2018	2821
Myanmar	2016	2913
Maldives	2017	2758
Malawi	2010	4415
Mozambique	2011	4124
Namibia	2013	1050
Nigeria	2008	17274
	2013	20209
	2018	7952
Nepal	2011	3278
	2016	3542

Peru	2005	2918
	2006	3231
	2007	3127
	2008	7762
	2009	11851
	2010	8072
	2011	11047
Philippines	2008	6600
	2013	7530
Pakistan	2012	3383
	2018	3770
Rwanda	2010	2465
	2015	1467
Sierra Leone	2013	3713
Senegal	2017	2185
Sao Tome and Principe	2008	1396
Chad	2015	3079
Togo	2014	4413
Tajikistan	2012	3926
	2017	4461
East Timor	2009	2034
	2016	2928
Tanzania	2010	4793
	2015	6294
Ukraine	2007	1860
Uganda	2006	1199
	2016	5822
South Africa	2016	1664
Zambia	2007	3426
	2013	7535
Zimbabwe	2010	3749
	2015	4344